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Association for Applied Sport Psychology Annual Conference 2011:

An Overview and a Personal Highlight

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About the Author

Faye Didymus is a doctoral candidate under the supervision of Dr David Fletcher at Loughborough University, U.K. Her research is focused on the psychology of sporting excellence, and in particular, on the cognitive aspects of organizational stress in sport performers. Faye has attended a number of international conferences to date but this was her first attendance at the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) annual conference.

Introduction

The AASP Annual Conference 2011 took place in the spectacular surroundings of Waikiki Beach, Hawaii. This suburb of Honolulu was a stunning location to share ideas, build relationships, and relax with friends and colleagues alike. The conference took place between 20th and 24th September 2011 and consisted of five pre-conference workshops (including one outreach workshop), six featured presentations, 124 posters, 88 lectures, 26 symposia, 24 special interest group meetings, 22 workshops, three panels, and one invited scientist-practitioner interview. The featured presentations were delivered by Gloria Balague (Coleman Griffith Address), Dorothy Espelage (Social Psychology Keynote Address), Darren Treasure (Performance Psychology Keynote Address), William Parham (Invited Ethics Address), Jay Maddock (Health and Exercise Psychology Keynote Address), Sandy Gordon (International Distinguished Scholar Presentation), and Jack Lesyk (Presidential Address). The focus of this review will now turn to one of my personal highlights. This was a symposium entitled “Choking under Pressure and Clutch Performance: Introducing Debate, New Theories, and Future Research,” which I found particularly interesting and engaging.

Personal Highlight

This symposium, which was organized by Dr Christopher Mesagno (University of Ballarat), provided delegates with four presentations, each of which delivered a complimentary perspective on the choking under pressure phenomenon. First to take the floor was Dr Denise Hill (University of Gloucestershire) who discussed the definitional debate surrounding choking under pressure in sport. Denise argued that the definitions of choking, which refer to the phenomenon as “performance decrements under pressure situations” (Baumeister, 1984, p. 610) or “inferior performance despite striving and incentives for superior performance” (Baumeister & Showers, 1986, p. 361), fall short of adequately defining the concept. Whilst Denise praised the quality of much of the research to date, her argument, supported by examples from the literature, was that choking definitions have led to a body of research that has examined underperformances rather than choking per se. In order to address these shortcomings, two modern definitions have been proposed. The first new definition states that choking is “a process whereby the individual perceives that resources are insufficient to meet the demands of the situation, and concludes with a significant drop in performance – a choke” (Hill, Hanton, Fleming, & Matthews, 2009, p. 206). The second new definition states that choking is “a critical deterioration in skill execution, leading to substandard performance that is caused by an elevation in anxiety levels under perceived pressure, at a time when successful outcome is normally attainable by the athlete” (Mesagno & Mullane-Grant, 2010, p. 343). Denise concluded that, whilst these new definitions go some way towards appropriately defining the phenomenon, they too are inadequate when attempting to accurately define choking under pressure. The search for the definition of choking continues.

Next to take the floor was Dr Chris Mesagno who discussed his extensions of existing models of choking under pressure. Chris introduced the audience to the two models of

choking that have been identified in the published literature to date: the self-focus model and the distraction model. Although these models are different, they both fundamentally believe that heightened anxiety causes attentional disturbances, which in turn results in choking when individuals are exposed to the pressure of performing in a sporting arena. Chris then discussed the Self-Presentational Model of choking, which he and his colleagues have developed to extend the existing models. This new model builds on previous conceptualizations by incorporating situational factors, personality characteristics, athletic identity, and sport performers' perceptions of the pressured environment. Chris proposed that situational factors (e.g., audience presence), personality characteristics (e.g., perfectionism), and an individual's athletic identity will influence a sport performer's perception of the pressured environment. He then explained that an individual's perception of the pressured environment has an impact on self-presentational concerns, which may in turn be influenced by self-awareness and state anxiety. Chris then proposed that self-presentational concerns influence the choice of coping strategies, which may contribute to choking under pressure. Chris concluded that, although the model provides a more comprehensive representation of choking, the evidence to support the model is indirect at present. Therefore, Chris suggested that further research is required to investigate the relationships between the different components of the model.

Chris' presentation was followed by Dr Geir Jordet (Norwegian School of Sport Sciences) who discussed the prevention of choking under pressure in soccer. Geir began by describing the success and failure rates of penalty kicks in major soccer competitions since 1976. He concluded that 38.2% of kicks are missed when there is a negative shot valence (i.e., a missed penalty will result in the game being instantly lost) compared to the 92.0% of kicks that are scored when there is a positive shot valence (i.e., a scored penalty instantly leads to match victory; Jordet & Hartman, 2008). This data formed the rationale for using

penalty shootouts as conditions which provide pressured environments for the exploration of choking under pressure. Geir then outlined the conceptual model that he used as a framework for his research. He explained that a high ego orientation (e.g., a concern with demonstrating superior competence to ourselves and others) creates a potential for ego threat and emotional distress, which in turn may lead to failed self-regulation. Geir explained that failed self-regulation is apparent when an individual becomes distracted by heightened anxiety, tries to escape the situation, and/or tries too hard and therefore, chokes under pressure. Geir then explained that 82% of the players who celebrate after a scored penalty finish on the winning team in important penalty shootouts and therefore, moved on to discuss the role of social support in preventing choking under pressure. Using video footage, Geir outlined his implementation of a social support intervention in soccer, which resulted in improved performance. Geir concluded that celebrating scored penalties and increasing social support are promising possibilities for the prevention of choking under pressure in soccer.

Finally, Dr Mark Otten (California State University) discussed improved rather than decreased performance under pressure in order to explore why some individuals perform better than others in pressure situations. Mark referred to improved performances as “clutch” performance, which he defined as better than usual performance under pressure (Otten, 2009). Mark discussed his recent program of research that has explored clutch performance in basketball free throws. In the first study of this program, Mark used the CSAI-2R (Cox, Martens, & Russell, 2003) and the Perceived Control Scale (PCS; Otten, 2009) to determine why some sport performers thrive whilst others seem to choke in pressure situations. Mark created a pressured environment by video-taping a second set of 15 free throws and telling the participants that the tape would be used by the coaches and the researcher. A key finding of this study reveals that perceived control correlated significantly with performance under pressure and thus, Mark conducted a second study to further explore this finding. In this next

study, the PCS was replaced with a new positive anxiety measure, which was matched to the CSAI-2R that was also used. The results of this research led Mark to propose a revised model of clutch performance to accommodate his findings to date. Mark is currently investigating the accuracy of this model and applying the new theory to baseball in order to determine whether different types of skills are susceptible to clutch performance when performed in pressured environments.

Closing Thoughts

In closing, I have many other personal highlights such as the Performance Psychology Keynote Address by Darren Treasure, the opportunity to engage with numerous people in the poster sessions, and the closing banquet, which took place on the Edge Pool deck with sensational views over the North Pacific Ocean, but space precludes a review of these highlights here. Overall, the AASP 2011 conference was a worthwhile experience from which I have developed both personally and professionally. The variety of sessions, topics, and social activities that were on offer seamlessly came together to create a five-day conference in paradise. The hosting hotel (Sheraton Waikiki) flaunted panoramic ocean views, which were a regular reminder of our delightful backdrop. This extraordinary location meant that numbers were slightly down on previous AASP conferences but those who were able to make the trip to Hawaii were presented with a display of applied sport psychology research from around the world. As with many exciting experiences, the conference seemed to pass in a flash but it is with renewed inspiration and growing confidence that I eagerly await the next AASP annual conference to be held in Atlanta during October 2012. I hope to see you there!

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